

THE ARENA IN THE EARLY COURT NOVEL

by Lee Stavenhagen

In the "Adventure of the Fountain" as told by Chrétien de Troyes in his *le chevalier au lyon*, the knight Calogrenant, adventuring in the forest, is directed to a magic spring by a hideous *vilain*, a monster who shepherds an extraordinary flock. In the edition by Mario Roques, this encounter takes place in a clearing described as filled with "tors salvages, ors et lieparz / qui s'antre-conbatoient tuit" (lines 278-279). In a note to this passage, the editor defends this reading on the basis of analogies among the manuscripts as preferable to the enigmatic "tors sauvages et espaars" given in the edition by Foerster, and goes on to remark: "La réunion des ours et des léopards avec les taureaux, même sauvages, serait de toute façon très singulière. . . . La leçon . . . comporte certainement des erreurs que nous ne savons comment corriger."¹

Studies on the origin of this tale have led to Celtic sources, which preserve versions of a katabasis or *Himmelsreise* showing some general similarity with the "Adventure of the Fountain," but the animals in these various episodes in the Celtic versions are always bulls or oxen only.² This would appear to support the authenticity of Foerster's reading, and seems to fit better with the following passages. Calogrenant goes on to say that "nule beste n'est tant fiere / ne plus orgueilleuse de tor," and when Ivain accomplishes the adventure, he sees only bulls, "si vit les tors et le vilain" (794).

But there seems to have been a general tendency toward proliferation of the beasts involved. According to Hartmann von Aue, translating Chrétien's romance near the end of the twelfth century, Kalogreant says: "da gesach ich mir vil leide / eine swaere ougenweide, / al der tiere hande / die man mir ie genande, / vehten unde ringen / mit eislichen dingen" (403-408), and Iwein finds

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"den griulichen man / uf jeneme gevilde / sten bi sinem wilde" (980-982). Could Chrétien or Hartmann have been influenced in presenting this odd scene by a contemporary convention or source? Its very oddity gives one the impression that we have here a stock incident of some kind, such as the later court novel used so freely.

The *Rolandslied*, a didacticized German version of the *Chanson de Roland*, done by the cleric Konrad about 1170 or earlier, mentions a park full of battling animals. Messengers from the heathen king of Sarraguz, Marsilie, come to the Carolingian camp and are astonished at the splendors of a Christian court, among them the zoo: "si chomen zu einem bougarten / der was gecieret harte: / da uundin si inne / di lewen also grimme / mit den beren uechten" (643-647). None of the surviving French versions of the *Chanson de Roland* mention any such component of Charlemagne's retinue; Konrad must either have used a version now lost or have drawn on a popular convention of some kind that assigned this unusual garden to the imperial camera. The *Chanson de Roland* does enumerate the animals sent as gifts from Marsilie to the emperor: "... urs e leuns e veltres enchaingnez / set cenz cameilz e mil hosturs muez" (stanza IX). These are of course perfectly proper gifts to a medieval emperor. Charlemagne had in fact received apes, bears, lions, and an elephant from Oriental rulers as tokens of amity, the latter from Harūn arRashid himself.³ The elephant, which arrived in 801, was not intended only as a munificent gesture; since the end of the Roman republic ownership of elephants had been reserved specifically to emperors, and thus the gift marked diplomatic recognition of Charlemagne's imperium.⁴ Otto I, Friedrich Barbarossa, and Henry I of England all are known to have received specimens of Oriental fauna from various foreign states. Friedrich II, with typical flamboyance, had himself followed everywhere by his entire zoo; his elephant of state constituted the most fantastic recognition of all, coming from the mythical Prester John, and was the center of all kinds of antics reported with characteristic gusto by the chroniclers of that stunning reign.⁵

And so Marsilie's ambassadors need not have been surprised to find that Charlemagne had brought his animal park with him to Cordova. The author of the *Rolandslied* was only citing a convention of the imperial majesty. That same convention guided the scribes who embellished Chrétien's account of the "Adventure of the Fountain" with bears and lions, and was known to Hartmann, who preferred a version with every possible kind of animal over the relatively unmajestic spectacle of mere battling bulls.

But why do the animals fight? In the case of Ivain's adventure, such a feature would obviously serve to reinforce the miraculous quality so indispensable to knightly encounters. But again, a certain conventionality is evident in the description; the animals in the *Rolandslied* fight, even though the context is only weakly colored with chivalrous adventure. The narrative intent there too, of course, is to present a marvel, but there is now an obvious source for the idea. That is what the imperial animals do: fight. The spectacles in the arenas of the Roman Empire consumed animals in such numbers that the ecology of vast areas of North Africa and the Middle East was drastically altered. Nor was beast against beast the only kind of entertainment offered; men and women, slaves, criminals, free or even noble, fought for their lives against every sort of dangerous creature the provinces and expeditions were able to provide.⁶ And so the Carolingian imperial ideal could call attention yet again to its claim to Roman succession with an arena, park, or circus of battling lions, bears, and leopards, and the knight of the chivalrous age also could find a parallel for himself in the great tournaments of the past. Martial praises an outstandingly heroic gladiator for subduing twenty wild beasts and remarks that the ancient world would never have had to fear animals had this champion lived then, whose deeds the poet likens to Hercules' task of ridding the world of monsters.⁷ So must the dragon-slaying knight have imagined his services.

These observations tell us a little more about the literary technique of the early continental court novelists. The beauty of Chrétien's accomplishment exemplifies how aware these artists were of their own modernity, which distinguishes them like nothing else not only from their literary predecessors but contemporary practitioners of other genres as well. "Das grundlegend Neue im Werk Chrétien's," observes Brogsitter, "läßt sich freilich nicht aus seinen Quellen begreifen, sondern entspricht ganz den verfeinerten Ansprüchen der neuen ritterlich-höfischen Kultur, wie sie sich in Frankreich bis zur Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts entwickelt hatte."⁸ For Konrad, whose *Rolandslied* contains little more than the very rudiments of courtly polish, the arena and private menagerie remain a stock imperial perquisite. But for Chrétien and his circle, and Hartmann's modish knighthood, imperial majesty ran a very poor second to the dash and tragedy of King Arthur, who was himself first and foremost a knight. Stock themes and incidents were reworked to fit new tastes, sometimes seemingly almost overnight, resulting in the imaginative detail so characteristic of

Arthurian romance. The arena, once a kind of personal symbol for the emperor, was quickly converted to yet another opportunity for knightly involvement, for the adventures that now were so strenuously applied as tests of innate virtue, the one real touchstone of nobility. That is why modern literary research still finds a riddle in nearly every Arthurian motive; everything has to be dismantled, cleaned off, and examined, and always rewards the effort by turning out to be composed of the most surprising variety of ideas.

NOTES

1. *Les romans de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris, 1960), IV, 213. W. Foerster, *Der Löwenritter* (Halle, 1887), lists in the note to line 278 all variants known to him, including proposed translations.

2. See W. A. Nitze, "Yvain and the Myth of the Fountain," *Speculum*, XXX (1955), 170-179; A. C. L. Brown, "Iwain," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, VIII (1903), 70-74.

3. *Annales Einhardi*, anno 801, in *MGH*, SS., I, 190, and *Gesta Karoli*, II, *ibid.*, II, 752.

4. The *Historia Augusta* lists among the signs of Aurelian's coming emperorship the gift of a huge elephant, "quem ille imperatori optulit, solusque omnium privatus Aurelianus elefanti dominus fuit" (XXVI, 5, 6).

5. The elephant came in fact from the Sultan alKamil of Egypt, with whom Friedrich sought an alliance for the Crusade of 1228 against the Sultanate of Damascus. See Ernst Kantorowicz, *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite* (Berlin, 1928), pp. 168-169, 286-287, and bibliography in the *Ergänzungsband* to both passages.

6. See George Jennison, *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome* (Manchester, 1937), and F. Drexel, "Über die bei den römischen Venationen verwandten Tiere," in Ludwig Friedlaender, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms* (Leipzig, 1921), IV, 268-275.

7. *Liber spectaculorum*, XXVII.

8. *Artusepik* (Stuttgart, 1965), p. 3.